

March 22, 2005 - A Look at David Donahue's Career Path

Indiana DOC Commissioner Looks Back on Career Climb
By Meghan Mandeville, News Research Reporter

NOTE: The Commissioner's interview with Megan Mandeville took place on March 18, 2005. This article is being republished with the permission of Corrections.com. Please read more about Dave Donahue today.

When J. David Donahue took his first job as a corrections officer at a county jail, he didn't know that corrections would become a lifelong career for him. Twenty-four years later, he's still at it, heading a state corrections system, pleased that he has dedicated himself professionally to such a dynamic field.

Donahue was appointed Commissioner of the Indiana Department of Correction in January. He has previously worked as a deputy commissioner in Kentucky and for the federal Bureau of Prisons.

Recently, The Corrections Connection Network News talked with Donahue about his rise through the corrections field and what it takes to become a successful leader in corrections.

Q: How did you become involved in corrections?

Donahue: It's interesting. I always thought I wanted to be a policeman. When I got out of high school, I was one of those young kids who immediately knew what I was going to major in. [I went to] Eastern Kentucky University and I pursued police administration and criminal justice. I had a corrections minor, but, again, I was focused on becoming a police officer.

I got married while I was in college and, [when I got out] I needed a job. My first job was as a corrections officer in a local, municipal county jail. I did that, literally, because I was looking for a job. I did that for about a year or a year and a half, wanted to pursue a career in law enforcement and wanted to look at other state and federal agencies. I applied for several federal law enforcement positions simultaneously, but the Bureau of Prisons was the first agency that responded to my desire for seeking other employment. I interviewed and immediately was hired as a corrections officer in a federal prison in the community that I lived in. I started a new career. It was a better pay scale. After about seven or eight months in the BOP, learning enough about that agency, I recognized that the Bureau afforded folks the opportunity to promote because the agency was fairly large. But it required mobility. I actually had to kind of think about, at that point in time in my career, did I want to consider corrections as a profession. If I chose to consider it in that agency, I had to agree to look at my mobility and relocate around the country. I elected to consider promotional opportunities and my very first promotion, interestingly enough, in the BOP was going from a corrections officer to a case manager. That was actually a pay cut - a demotion in salary, but a promotion in responsibility.

It was a great career with the BOP. I spent 10 years with the bureau, working in several institutions around the country. I had opportunities to get involved in making decisions and had the great fortune of seeing some real superstars in the business.

I left the BOP for an opportunity I was intrigued by and interested in at that point in time - a concept known as private corrections. I had actually been assigned to a task force for the BOP to evaluate private corrections in about 1985 or 1986. That task force was a group of practitioners in the federal government that looked at alternatives to government corrections. There was a private company - literally a start up company at that time because there were no private corrections entities - that was actually coming out of the ground in Kentucky. Having come from Kentucky originally, I had some presence of the geography and system in Kentucky and was asked by the task force to do some evaluating. I saw it as an [exciting] opportunity. After due diligence, I left the BOP and became a warden of the first private prison in the country at that time.

I believed in the basics, the fundamentals, of the business. The mission of corrections is pretty consistent around the country - [to operate a] safe arena for taxpayers and the public [and to make sure that] conditions of confinement and quality of life for staff and inmates is recognized.

I was a practitioner that believed in standards and performance indicators. It was a real opportunity to ensure that you could do those kinds of things, but looking at alternative delivery styles, whether procurement or staff development or actually a program progression for inmates. This was probably an area of my career that, from a professional sense, gave me the largest charge because we were able to demonstrate with a great group of employees and a great management team, we took a private facility and went through an accreditation process with the ACA. The facility was accredited with 100 percent compliance on both standard sets - mandatory and non-mandatory. That was a phenomenal accomplishment. Skeptics suggested that the only way privatization [worked for corrections was to] cut corners and do things contrary to traditional corrections.

I left that facility after about three or four years and became a management director of that company. I began promoting additional correctional facilities around the country to look at alternative delivery systems and somewhere prior to my joining that private company, I was auditing prisons for the ACA as a field auditor. I went around country as a consultant assisting jurisdictions in managing affairs by assisting in doing quality control reviews on best practices. I have continued to do that for the last 20 years - often at the request of the agencies that had the need for assistance.

I left private corrections and, ultimately, joined forces again in state government. In my career path, I started as a CO, was a warden of a couple of facilities around the country, a deputy commissioner of a state agency and I am now commissioner of a state agency. Coming back into government corrections after [working in] private corrections really allowed me to look at corrections now as a business. Corrections is a very expensive part of social responsibility. Good people can make poor choices, so corrections systems are designed to allow for those individuals to respond to their actions with an appropriate reaction. The punitive system is designed to [let people] pay the debts of their judgments.

They are paying their debts, but they're not in prison for punishment, they are in prison as punishment.

The vast majority of those folks are going to get out of jails; they are going to reintegrate into society, whether society is prepared or not. In Indiana, our primary responsibility is to obviously look at public safety, but to look at the effects of the business and to focus on the allowance of reintegration in a successful manner. Currently, our objective here is to not only become efficient, but to also focus on how do we improve the ability for offenders to go through the system gaining the necessary understanding of how [they] can change [their] behaviors and become successful contributors to society.

Q: What do you like best about your job?

Donahue: I thoroughly enjoy my job. I have a passion for it. It's a people business. It something that every day, there's an opportunity to improve conditions [and] to improve outcomes.

In corrections, we measure success, obviously, by keeping facilities secure and safe, but we also need to focus aggressively on our outcomes - recidivism rates and returning individuals into communities [to live productive lives]. We are going to aggressively promote that idea so that we can attempt to change the cycle of criminal behavior - the re-offenses that occur more often than not by people being released from correctional facilities. We have just under 10,000 employees and 34 prisons. Those employees are working hard everyday to make sure that the focus is on the fundamentals and I am confident with the energy that is necessary and the support that is necessary, we are going to do a better job moving forward.

Q: What have some of your greatest accomplishments been?

Donahue: I guess there are personal and professional accomplishments. The personal accomplishments are just being given the opportunity to be here in Indiana and to have been given the opportunity in previous positions in my career where, really, mentors or associates recognized that I was willing to commit myself to the business. That personal accomplishment is something that I am proud of.

When I look back on staff that I have had the pleasure of working with - seeing staff develop is a huge professional accomplishment. I have been in this business long enough. I have seen offenders get out and [become] very successful in their communities. I recently had the pleasure, here, in Indiana, of meeting a gentleman who, 24 years ago, was incarcerated in the BOP. Today, he is a very successful business person in the community who is contributing to the community. What a great success story - to see those types of individuals come out of an institutional environment.

Staff development and offender reentry are the real successes of this business. I have had a ton of fun and I continue to have fun everyday.

It is a business that relies heavily on teamwork and you just have to feel really good about those kinds of activities. When you are in corrections, bad things can happen in good prisons. It takes teamwork [to

deal with issues].

Q: What advice do you have for future corrections leaders?

Donahue: I'll be very frank. It's easy sometimes in a career, whether it's corrections or other professions, to think that you may have made the wrong choice.

It's not a business [where] you are going to do the same thing every day. I encourage young professionals to [seek out] their own staff development opportunities and to take advantage of every one of those - professional development seminars or educational extensions that they can get involved in to become better prep for the next promotional opportunity. Corrections will take advantage of young professionals that are prepared to move up through the ranks. All too often folks will get bypassed for promotional opportunities because their resume didn't stay current.

Experience is extremely important in this business and that only occurs by maturation or tenure. You can't [instill] experience, but you can [instill] professional development and you can [instill] skill sets that are needed to handle new opportunities.

I know folks will continue to be given those opportunities as their agency moves forward. Corrections is an industry that, as much as I would like to think that we could figure out how to get out of business, it's going to be a business that is around for a long time.